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A New Inscription of Xerxes? One More Forgery

For M.

1 Introduction

In 2007, a complete collection of inauthentic inscriptions in Old Persian cuneiform script was published (Schmitt 2007). It described and discussed, in detail, (1) ancient texts not originating from the king, who was their supposed author, as well as (2) modern forgeries designed to mislead, and (3) imitations of cuneiform inscriptions fabricated more for 'fun' than any more serious intent. Since then, the number of such forged inscriptions has increased. There is now a tapestry including an Old Persian text, which turned out to be an adaptation of Xerxes' Persepolis inscription XPe[1] (Schmitt 2010). A silver tablet purporting to be that of Darius I's co-conspirator Otanes is a blatant forgery given the serious grammatical mistakes in the Old Persian (cf. Schmitt 2012: 408ab). Such forged inscriptions are found on a variety of objects and, in virtually every case, display their individual peculiarities.

The most recent example of such an inscription is the text found on a stone tablet confiscated by the Tabriz police authorities and now in the collection of the Azerbaijan Museum there. It is no exception to the 'rule' outlined above: to the right of the Old Persian there are traces, viz. the beginnings, of 12 lines of a Babylonian text–yet, according to the normal arrangement, the order would be Old Persian – Elamite – Babylonian as, e.g., in XEa and XVa–so one would rather expect to find the Elamite version here. First and foremost, however, the Old Persian text must be discussed, especially as the few Babylonian signs reveal little more than traces of single words.

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[1] The abbreviations designating the Old Persian inscriptions are those used in Schmitt 2009.

2 The stone tablet and its inscription

Doctor Maryam Dara (Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization, Linguistics, Inscriptions and Texts Research Centre, Tehran), to whom I also owe the photograph reproduced here (**fig. 1**), informed me that the Eastern Azerbaijan police confiscated the stone block in October 2013. I lack any further knowledge about the provenance. The inscription is written quite carefully on a basalt tablet which, sadly, is damaged. The maximum dimensions of the stone are 62 x 37 x 16 cm. Between the Old Persian and the (supposed) Babylonian text two vertical lines which frame the texts can be made out; the space between them is 1.8 cm. To the right of the Old Persian text the corresponding frameline is really a matter of guesswork. The 17 lines of the Old Persian inscription, 2.2 cm in height, are separated from each other by ruled lines.
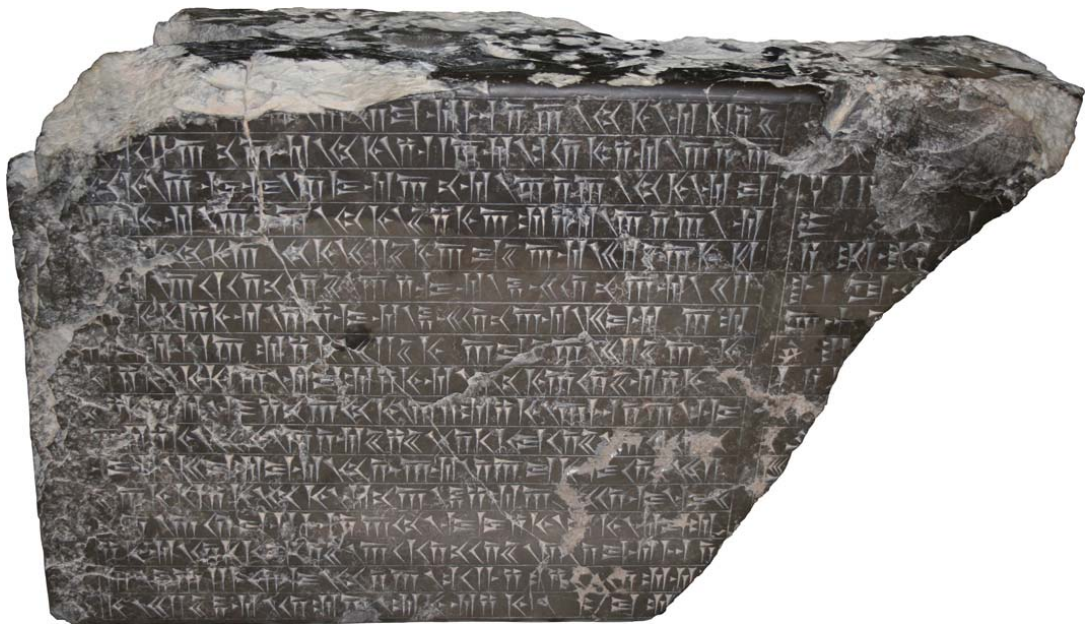
Fig. 1: The Tabriz inscription "of Xerxes".
Photograph reproduced by courtesy of Maryam Dara.

3 The new text (with grammatical analysis)

Although a number of signs are missing at the edges, the 17 lines of Old Persian text set within a framed panel (only small parts of the left edge of which are preserved) can be restored in its entirety and with absolute certainty, due to the well-known stereotyped wording of the Old Persian cuneiform inscriptions. The transliteration runs as follows:

1   [b-g :] ⌜v-z-r-k⌝ : ⌜a-u⌝-r-m-z-d-a : h-y : m-ϑ-i-š-

2   [t] ⌜: b⌝-g-a-n-a-m : h-y : i-m-a-m : b-u-mⁱ-i-m : a-d-a

3   [:] h-y : a-v-<m> : a-s-m-a-n-m : a-d-a : h-y : m-r-

4   [t]-⌜i⌝-y-m : a-d-a : h-y : š-i-y-a-t-i-m : a-d-a : m-

5   [r-t]-⌜i⌝-y-h-y-a : h-y : x-š-y-a-r-š-a-m : x-š-a-y-ϑ-

6   [i-y]-m : a-kᵘ-u-n-u-š : a-i-v-m : p-rᵘ-u-n-a-m : x-

7   [š-a]-y-ϑ-i-y-m : a-i-v-m : p-rᵘ-u-n-a-m : f-r-m-a-t-

8   ⌜a-r⌝-m [:] ϑ-a-t-i-y : x-š-y-a-r-⌜š⌝-a : x-š-a-y-

9   ϑ-i-y : y-ϑ-a : m-r-t-i-y-m : ⌜d⌝-h-y-a-u-š-m-i-y :

10   ⌜š⌝-i-y-⌜a⌝-t : v-i-n-a-h-y : a-d-t-i-y : a-z-d-a : b-v-

11   ⌜a-t⌝-i-y : h-y : a-d-m-š-i-š : u-ϑ-dᵘ-u-š : a-kᵘ-u-n-

12   v-m : f-r-t-r-m : h-c-a-m : d-a-r-y-v-u-š : x-

13   š-a-y-ϑ-i-y : h-y : m-n-a : p-i-t-a ⌜: h⌝-u-v : v-š-

14   n-a : a-u-r-m-z-d-a-h : v-s-i-y : t-y : m-r-t-

15   i-y-m : u-ϑ-dᵘ-u-š : a-kᵘ-u-n-u-š : a-u-r-m-z-d-

16   a : p-a-tᵘ-u-v : h-d-a : b-g-i-b-i-⌜š⌝ : u-t-m-[i]-

17   y : x-š-ç-m : u-t-a : t-y-m-i-y : k-r-t-[m]

The only emendation required is *a-v-<m>* in line 3, where the stone has "a-v-v," probably because the engraver was confused by the similarity of the characters *m* and *v* (both have a horizontal before a vertical stroke on the left). The only unresolved question is whether in l. 17 the text ended with a word-divider (as in XPd) or not; the space for it exists. Note, further, that the word-dividers vary considerably in size: most take up the full height of the line, while some are so small as to be scarcely discernible (e.g., the first one in l. 8).

Closer examination of the text suggests that some of the characters are written quite close together at the left margin (i.e. at the beginning of the lines), so that the strokes of the neighbouring characters appear to be joined together. A particularly clear example of this is found in the first two signs of l. 11 (a-t), where there is virtually no room for the two horizontal strokes of the *t* character. This is most easily explained by assuming that the text was engraved from right to left, contrary to the normal direction of writing. Although one copy of the so-called Daiva Inscription XPh ("XPhᵇ")–the text of which breaks off in l. 51, where the right-hand part has been engraved and the left-hand one is missing, see Schmitt 2000, pl. 46–shows that already in antiquity an engraver might work from right to left, this raises suspicions about the inscription's authenticity. It hints at an author who is used to writing from right to left (as in, e.g., the Perso-Arabic alphabet).

However, the issue can only be settled after careful examination of the text itself. It can be 'normalized' in phonemic-phonetic transcription and, with respect to the discussion below, we may also divide it into shorter units:

§ 1 (1–8)   baga vazr̥ka Auramazdā,

haya maϑišta bagānām,

haya imām būmīm adā,

haya avam asmānam adā,

haya martiyam adā,

haya šiyātim adā martiyahyā,

haya Xšayar̥šām xšāyaϑiyam akunau̯š,

ai̯vam parūnām xšāyaϑiyam,

ai̯vam parūnām framātāram.

§ 2 (8–17)   ϑāti Xšayar̥šā xšāyaϑiya:

yaϑā martiyam dahyāu̯šmai̯ šiyāta vai̯nāhi,

adatai̯ azdā bavāti,

haya adamšiš uϑanduš akunavam;

frataram hacāma

Dārayavau̯š xšāyaϑiya, haya manā pitā,

hau̯ vašnā Auramazdāha vasai̯ taya martiyam uϑanduš akunau̯š;

Auramazdā pātu

hadā bagai̯biš

utamai̯ xšaçam

utā tayamai̯ kr̥tam.

As in a total of c.20 inscriptions from Darius I to late Achaemenid times, the text begins in § 1 with praise of Ahuramazda. The longer variant, adding *haya maϑišta bagānām* "who (is) the greatest among the gods," is attested for Xerxes I only in the Alvand (XEa) and Van (XVa) inscriptions. The wording is not unusual, agrees with the normal version and has, therefore, been copied quite correctly from whatever version has been used as a model. The translation runs:

§ 1   The great god (is) Ahuramazda,

the greatest among the gods,

who created this earth,

who created yonder heaven,

who created man,

who created blissful happiness for man,

who made Xerxes king,

the one the king of many,

the one the master of many.

In most of Darius I's inscriptions and in all the texts of Xerxes I, this introductory section is followed by the king's self-presentation

adam Dārayavauš/Xšayaṛšā, xšāyaϑiya vazṛka …
"I (am) Darius/Xerxes, the Great King …".

In the new inscription such a self-presentation is lacking, instead of which the normal formula introducing direct speech

ϑāti Xšayaṛšā xšāyaϑiya
"Proclaims Xerxes, the King"

announces a royal statement. That text arrangement and the statement itself have no parallel in the known corpus of the Achaemenid cuneiform inscriptions in Old Persian. This message from the Great King is followed in ll. 15-17 by the usual 'protection formula'–the request for protection of the king, his kingdom and what he has built–which again and again, as we know, serves as a peroration. The individual components of that protection formula are known from other Xerxes inscriptions, as is clear from the relevant summary in Schmitt 1992: 151-153. In sum, the components found here only occur together in XPd and the Van inscription XVa. If we include the expanded version of the introductory praise of Ahuramazda (see above), the only inscription which already includes all the occurrences of the new text, known from other texts, is XVa.[2]

One further point connected to the protection formula is crucial. It is absolutely clear that all references to it begin with the sentence

mām Auramazdā pātu
"Me may Ahuramazda protect!",

with a marked word order, for emphasis, and the topicalised object *mām* "me" preceding the subject of the sentence. This object, and with it the reference to the king himself, is indispensible, so that the fact that it is absent in the new text is inexcusable. This is the first solid indicator that the text was written by a person with an insufficient command of Old Persian.

Analysis of the passage (ll. 9-15), which has not been discussed so far, will provide conclusive proof. It is almost impossible to translate it on the basis of the Old Persian used in the new inscription. We can only make a guess at what the author was trying to express.

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[2] As regards the spelling of *uta-mai̯*, which is at issue in XVa, see Schmitt 2009: 182a. Whether XVa had a word-divider in l. 27 at the end of the text, is just as unclear as it is in the Tabriz inscription (see above).

§ 2   Proclaims Xerxes, the King:

(A)   "When you see the man in (or: of) my land happy,

(B)   then it shall become known to you (i. e., you shall become aware),

(C)   that I made them pleased;

(D)   formerly, before myself

(E)   Darius, the King, who (was) my father, –

(F)   he by the favour of Ahuramazda [made/undertook?] much, that he made the man pleased;

(G)   [me] may Ahuramazda protect

(H)   together with the gods

(I)   and my kingdom

(J)   and what (has been) built by me!"

In grammatically correct Old Persian, however, these short statements would run as follows:

(A)   yaϑā martiyam dahyāu̯v-ā-mai̯ (or sim.; see below) šiyātam vai̯nāhi,

(B)   ada-tai̯ azdā bavāti,

(C)   taya adam-šiš (or: adam-šim) uϑandūš? (or sim.; see below) akunavam;

(D)   paruvam

(E)   Dārayavauš xšāyaϑiya, haya manā pitā,

(F)   hau̯ vašnā Auramazdāha vasai̯ [akunau̯š?], taya martiyam uϑandum akunau̯š;

(G)   [mām] Auramazdā pātu

(H)   hadā bagai̯biš

(I)   uta-mai̯ xšaçam

(J)   utā tayamai̯ kr̥tam.

I should explain in detail the differences between the reconstructed version, based on what I think are the author's intentions, and the faulty original attested in the new inscription:

(A) In two places it is not the case form required by the rules of syntax that is used: firstly in *dahyāu̯š-mai̯* "my land" nom. sing. (as attested in DB IV 39 only)[3] instead of loc. sing. *dahyāu̯v-ā-mai̯* or *dahyau̯-mai̯* or perhaps instead of gen. sing. *dahyau̯š-mai̯* and secondly in *šiyāta* "happy" nom. sing., too (as attested in XPh 47 and 55), instead of acc. sing. *šiyātam*. There is also the fact, that if we take the text as it appears, it is not consistent, for *dahyāu̯š°*, that is nom. fem., and *šiyāta*, that is nom. masc., do not agree with each other nor do they agree as the potential subject of the sentence with the verb *vai̯nāhi*, which is referring to the

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[3]   All the attested forms and the references for them may now be found easily in the various indexes in Schmitt 2014.

reader of the text and therefore is correctly found in the 2nd pers. sing. form. So this whole sentence is nothing else than ungrammatical stammering.

(B) These words are correctly taken over from DNa 43 and/or 45f. (the only attestations of *ada-tai̯* known until now).

(C) The phrase *azdā bav* "to become aware of" can be construed with a following directly quoted statement (as in DNa) or with an indirect quotation introduced by the conjunction *taya* "that" (see Schmitt 1995: 245), but on no account by the pronoun *haya* (nom. sing. masc.).–If need be, plur. *°šiš* "them" referring to sing. *martiyam* "the man" could be explained as a construction 'ad sensum;' not only *adam-šiš*, however, but also the expected *adam-šim* is attested.–The form of *uϑandu-* should be chosen accordingly, i.e. in agreement as to the number, in acc. plur. (**uϑandūš* or **uϑandāva*) or else acc. sing. (**uϑandum*). Since no Old Persian *u*-stem is attested in the acc. plur., we cannot decide about the correct form; but the form *uϑanduš* chosen by the author of the new text (as also in line 15 below) without any doubt is nothing else than the nom. sing. attested in XPl 30, which is the only evidence attested for this adjective.

(D) The normal expression for "formerly" in the Old Persian inscriptions is the inherited adverb *paruvam* (attested several times); it is not necessary, however, to express the point of reference, since that is self-evident. That means that *hacā-ma* is unnecessary and out of place.

(E) The two phrases *Dārayavauš xšāyaϑiya* "Darius, the King" and *haya manā pitā* "my father," both being attested several times, are taken over (e.g., from XPg 6f. or XVa 17f.) and combined with one another quite correctly.

(F) Since the conjunction *taya* "that" introduces a subordinate object sentence, the verb of the preceding main sentence introduced by the resumptive pronoun *hau̯* "he" obviously is missing; at best it can be restored as *akunau̯š* "he made (or: undertook)", especially since the adverb *vasai̯* "(very) much, in great number" is also attested in combination with this verbal root. For *uϑanduš* alias **uϑandum* see above ad (C).

(G) On the missing pronoun *mām* I already said above all that is necessary.

 Over all, it is obvious that the new text is full of serious grammatical errors, so that the conclusion is unavoidable that it has been forged by someone unfamiliar with Old Persian. To avoid any misunderstanding, I should add that these mistakes share few characteristics with those found in the late Achaemenid inscriptions of Artaxerxes II and III (on which, see Schmitt 1999: 111-18). It is especially the mix of perfectly correct passages, copied from the existing authentic texts, and completely incomprehensible passages created by an ignoramus, that definitively proves that we are dealing here with a modern forgery. And we can go still one step further and state that this text was created after 1967, because the word *uϑanduš* "pleased" was only encountered in the inscription XPl (l. 30) found on a stone tablet near Persepolis in February of that year.[4] Note, however, that the word (the counterpart of which in the similar inscription

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4   Gharib 1968 [1970] is the first edition of XPl; cf. esp. p.65 "*uϑaduš* [sic!] is a new word in Old Persian."

DNb had been read as "*u*[*xšna*]*uš*" previously) is there used differently. It characterises the king, in particular in terms of his attitude towards loyal subjects, and not – as the new text has it – his subjects themselves. But one final question remains: what was the author's purpose in creating such a blatant forgery of such a long inscription and on such a shapeless stone tablet?

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